

CLAIMS

1. A method for providing an interactive counseling session, comprising:

- 5 receiving a counseling request from at least one patient via a computer network;
in response to receipt of said counseling request, identifying a counselor; and
establishing an interactive counseling session
10 between said at least one patient and the and the identified counselor.

2. The method of claim 1 including the additional steps of:

- 15 before said establishing step, interactively determining session preferences from said at least one patient; and
at session end, handling administrative tasks including updating time records for said at least one
20 patient and said counselor.

3. The method of claim 2 including the step of:
during an interactive counseling session, storing elapsed time for said at least one patient and said
25 counselor.

4. The method of claim 3 wherein said identifying step includes:

- consulting a stored roster of counselors maintained
30 by specialty and availability.

5. The method of claim 4 wherein said receiving step includes:

determining whether said at least one patient desires to engage in private communication via a computer network with at least one third party during an interactive counseling session;

responsive to said determining step, contacting said at least one third party for learning whether said at least one third party is available to participate in said interactive counseling session; and

if so, establishing communication between said at least one third party and said patient.

6. The method of claim 5 comprising the additional steps of:

inquiring whether said counselor desires, during said interactive counseling session, consultation with at least a different counselor; and

responsive to said inquiring step, establishing private communication between said counselor and said at least a different counselor.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein said receiving step additionally comprises:

eliciting from said at least one patient a subject matter preference, a counselor preference and whether a one on one or group counseling session is requested.

8. The method of claim 7 including the additional steps of:

responsive to said eliciting step seeking an
5 existing appropriate group;

in response to said seeking step indicating desirability of group counseling, verifying agreement of all patients in said existing group to accept said patient as a new group member;

10 responsive to a negative outcome from said verifying
step, advising said patient; and

thereafter inquiring of said patient a willingness to wait until at least another patient indicates willingness to be in a new group.

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9. The method of claim 8 wherein said receiving step additionally includes:

determining when said patient wishes an appointment for said interactive counseling session; and

20 scheduling an appointment before said establishing
step.

10. The method of claim 1 including the additional step
25 of:

selectably providing a transcript of said interactive counseling session to said counselor.

11. Apparatus for providing an interactive counseling session, comprising:

means for receiving a counseling request from at least one patient via a computer network;

5 means operable in response to receipt of said counseling request, for identifying a counselor; and

means for establishing an interactive counseling session between said at least one patient and the identified counselor.

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12. The apparatus of claim 11 additionally including:

means, active before said means for establishing, for interactively determining session preferences from said at least one patient; and

15 means active at session end, for handling administrative tasks including updating time records for said at least one patient and said counselor.

13. The apparatus of claim 12 further including:

20 means active during an interactive counseling session, for storing elapsed time for said at least one patient and said counselor.

14. The apparatus of claim 13 wherein said means for identifying includes:

25 means for consulting a stored roster of counselors maintained by specialty and availability.

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15. The apparatus of claim 14 wherein said means for receiving includes:

means for determining whether said at least one patient desires to engage in private communication via a computer network with at least one third party during an interactive counseling session;

means responsive to said means for determining, for contacting said at least one third party for learning whether said at least one third party is available to participate in said interactive counseling session; and

means, active if said at least one third party is available, for establishing communication between said at least one third party and said patient.

16. The apparatus of claim 15 further comprising:

means for inquiring whether said counselor desires, during said interactive counseling session, consultation with at least a different counselor; and

means, responsive to said means for inquiring, for establishing private communication between said counselor and said at least a different counselor.

17. The apparatus of claim 16 wherein said means for receiving additionally comprises:

means for eliciting from said at least one patient a subject matter preference, a counselor preference and whether a one on one or group counseling session is requested.

18. The apparatus claim 17 further including:

means responsive to said eliciting step for seeking an existing appropriate group;

5 means, active in response to said means for seeking, for indicating desirability of group counseling, verifying agreement of all patients in said existing group to accept said patient as a new group member;

10 means, responsive to a negative outcome from said means for verifying, for advising said patient; and

means, thereafter active, for inquiring of said patient a willingness to wait until at least another patient indicates willingness to be in a new group.

15 19. The apparatus of claim 18 wherein said means for receiving additionally includes:

means for determining when said patient wishes an appointment for said interactive counseling session; and

20 means for scheduling an appointment before said establishing step.

20. The apparatus of claim 11 including the additional step of:

25 means selectably operable by said counselor for providing a transcript of said interactive counseling session to said counselor.

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21. A computer program product for managing interactive multiparty counseling sessions comprising:

- 5 means for selectively connecting via a computer network with one or more of a plurality of counselors;
- means for receiving via a computer network a request for counseling from at least a patient; and
- 10 means, operable in response to said means for receiving, for initiating a counseling session between a counselor and at least a patient.

22. The computer program product of claim 21 wherein said means for receiving comprises:

- 15 means for determining a status for a patient requesting counseling; and
- means for interactively learning patient preferences.

23. The computer program product of claim 22 wherein said means for learning additionally includes:

- means for eliciting from said patient a subject matter preference;
- 25 means for eliciting from said patient a counselor preference; and
- means for eliciting from said patient whether a one on one or group counseling session is desired.

24. The computer program product of claim 21 wherein said means for initiating additionally includes:

means for polling a roster of counselors
specializing in said subject matter;

5 means for choosing a counselor from said roster as a
function of availability to counsel; and

means, in response to said means for choosing, for assigning a chosen counselor to said patient.

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25. The computer program product of claim 21 additionally comprising:

means for establishing a group counseling session for a plurality of patients and a counselor.

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26. The computer program product of claim 25 wherein said means for establishing includes:

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        means for determining whether a group already
20  exists;

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if so, upon verifying agreement of patients in said existing group, means for adding a new patient; and

if not, means for advising a patient and determining whether said patient will wait until at least another

25 patient is willing to be in a new group.

27. The computer program product of claim 25 additionally including:

means for maintaining a roster of counselors by availability and specialty;

5 means for maintaining patient usage and payment records;

means for establishing and managing multiple communication events among said patients and said counselors; and

10 means for scheduling subsequent individual and group sessions for said patients and said counselors.

28. The computer program product of claim 27

15 additionally comprising:

means for establishing communication between a patient and a third party client during a session between said patient and a counselor.

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29. The computer program product of claim 28 additionally including:

means for selectively establishing communication among a plurality of counselors.

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30. The computer program product of claim 29 wherein said scheduling means comprises:

30 instant messaging means for contacting said patients and said counselors.

31. Apparatus for managing an interactive, multiparty counseling service comprising:

means for receiving a request for counseling from a patient;

5 means for determining patient status;

means responsive to said means for determining for updating or creating a patient record;

means for eliciting patient preferences;

first means responsive to said means for eliciting
10 for obtaining information for a third party participant;

second means responsive to said means for eliciting
for finding a counselor and group for said patient;

third means responsive to said eliciting means for scheduling an appointment for said patient;

15 means responsive to said means for finding for
notifying a counselor and group of said patient's
upcoming appointment;

means, active at appointment time, for setting up a communication session among said patient, said counselor, said group and any third party;

means selectively operable for providing a session transcript to said counselor; and

means for tracking and storing session metrics for administrative purposes.

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